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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Tarrant County Junior College District participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The primary goals included the following: (1) to develop an inclusive, non-traditional approach to the teaching of American literature, history, and culture; (2) to add courses across the curriculum that would be committed to the multi-cultural theme; and (3) to create a unified learning community. Steps taken to develop Common Ground courses included preparing students, faculty, and administration for the new courses, developing a newsletter, presenting an outline of the project to administrators and faculty, and holding a session where team members could share their ideas and materials. The teaching team now has a feel for what works and what does not, and the faculty's decision to relate historical events to contemporary life has turned out well. Classroom discussions centered on both historical information learned in the course and contemporary viewpoints from the course's reader. Obstacles faced by teachers included students who did not complete the reading assignments, class members who monopolized the conversation, and a poor mix of ethnic groups in the course. Remaining tasks include establishing better communication among campuses and adding other teamed and stand-alone Common Ground courses. (HAA)

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Tarrant County Junior College District
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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Progress Report

Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground

The Tarrant County Junior College District opened in 1967 with its first campus, named simple and appropriately, South Campus, because of its location in South Forth Worth. The Northeast Campus, located in Northeast Tarrant County, close to the suburbs of Bedford and Euless, opened in 1968 followed by the Northwest Campus in Northwest Forth Worth in 1976. This fall our new Southeast Campus opened in Arlington, another Forth Worth suburb. All four of our campuses could best be described as urban and diverse with approximately 1000 credit courses and about the same number of non-credit ones. Our total student population averages about 26, 000 each semester, with about 76% classified as Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, 9,5% African-American, 4% Asian, and .6% Native American, percentages reflective of the Tarrant County population in general. Our faculty is about 30% non-Caucasian. The numbers of Asian-American and African-American students are steadily increasing.

The initial goal of our Action Plan is to develop an inclusive, non-traditional approach to the teaching of American literature, history, and culture. From this initial goal we have derived some supporting objectives, the most immediate of which was to add to the Fall 1996 schedule a multicultural team of History 2613: United States History to 1876, and English 1613, Composition I, along with sections of the initial pair on each of our campuses. Our next objective is to continue adding a variety of

sections of already existing courses across the core curriculum that would be committed to the multi-cultural theme. Our long-term goal is to create a unified learning community through which the faculty would work together to plan and deliver a cluster of classes committed to carrying out our initial goal.

The TCJC Common Ground Team, upon returning from the West Coast Regional Conference on American Pluralism and Identity in Los Angeles, California, committed itself to a series of steps that would successfully lead to the scheduling of Common Ground courses in the spring of 1997. First on the agenda was a decision to divulge our new commitment to administration, faculty, and students to prepare them for spring Common Ground courses. Therefore, the Team visited department chairs, division chairs, presidents, and chancellors on the four campuses, appraising them of the Common Ground project and of our plans to conduct faculty development meetings. The administrators' reaction was positive. A District newsletter, The Quest, developed by the TCJC's Teams serves as an instrument to keep faculty and administrators abreast of our progess.

At a luncheon sponsored by the campuses' presidents on April 22, Dr. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory conducted her first site visit to TCJC whereby she outlined the project to administrators, faculty members of various disciplines. Comments on this informative meeting were so positive that the Team scheduled another workshop and demonstration by Dr. Brown-Guillory. On October 24, the Team hosted a luncheon and teleconference "From me to We: Reviewing America's Civic Life in an Information Age" on the Northwest Campus, and once again the attendance by faculty, administrators, and students was very impressive.

In a concluding session on November 5, TCJC's Common Ground teaching

teams met on the Southeast Campus in a show-and-tell session. We shared our spring publicity materials, and ideas on content and sequence for our scheduled spring Common Ground courses. Members of each team shared sample brochures, letters and flyers addressed to our spring Freshman Composition I and History I Common Ground students.

We have been able to accomplish much. Our charter teaching team believes they now have a feel for what works and what doesn't work in regard to reading assignments, types and number of texts to use, utilization of class time for student work, essay prompts, lecture and discussion time. Our faculty has successfully moved the course from the realm of the merely theoretical, expressed in the proposal, to the world of the real classroom. The course will certainly undergo some revision in the future, especially now that we have added four more teams, but we now have a starting point for these revisions.

The faculty made a decision to relate historical events to contemporary life, and it has turned out well. This sort of emphasis was incorporated in both class discussion and essay assignments. For critique and revision purposes, instructors viewed student essay drafts on an LCD, with mixed results. Students wrote and turned in each class period comments relating to the essays read and possible discussion questions stemming from those comments. The pairing of a content-centered course (American History) with a skills course (Composition I) seems to be working well, for the ideas explored in the history component provide the students with substantial topics on which to write.

Classroom discussion centered on historical information gathered from textbook readings, lecture and documents and more contemporary viewpoints from our essay

reader. The instructors started the semester asking some basic questions and had the class write about their own cultural identities. These responses were shared with the rest of the class in order to demonstrate the multicultural make-up of the group. This was worthwhile to show that even in a small group there exists a wide range of cultures. As they examined each new culture, the class explored stereotypes generally held in society regarding that group. Although they had poor minority representation in the class, instructors attempted to elicit from those students their diverse perspectives concerning historical and contemporary issues. One student, in refusing to be considered "white," described himself as "Hispanic Hispanic," so that self-disclosure was used to further explore stereotypes and multiculutralism within cultures.

Our teachers say that they have had the usual problems with some of the students not doing the reading assignments and some class members monopolizing the conversation. Other than that, the most formidable obstacle they faced had to with the ethnic mix in the class. The class was overwhelmingly male and Anglo-American, with only one African-American student and three Hispanic ones.

Much remains to be done. We need to establish better communication between campuses, now that we have added other teams, and we now must honor our commitment to add other teamed and stand-alone courses to our Common Ground curriculum. We have a proposal from faculty members on one of our campuses to add a teamed American History and Fundamentals of Public Speaking combination. Students would study famous speeches from American History, such as those from the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, and use them as inspiration for speeches of their own. We also plan to add an American Literature and Philosophy team.

We have had several discussion about what it "means" to be an American. Generally speaking, students and faculty alike seem to believe that being an American has more to do with adherence to specific ideals and values than it has to do with cultural identity, although these ideals and values are reflected in what could be termed American culture. We have in common a sense of hope that things could be better, a belief in the possibility of progress on both the individual and community level. We tend to believe in the value of competition, the availability of opportunity, the inevitability of change. Indeed, American culture is always in a state of flux, reflecting our collective restlessness and our relentless search for a better life.

Sometimes we are divided by a false sense of tradition: a reluctance to give up old ways, old stereotypes, old modes of expression, but it is our belief that we are united in more ways than we are divided. And our teachers tell us that this ideal is the one that surfaces in their class discussions more than any other.